

A Sermon Prepared by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	For the congregation of Christ Church, Spotsylvania, Virginia
To Be Delivered on May 31, 2009	On the Occasion of Pentecost Sunday

Text: John 15:26-27,16:4b-15

The Holy Encourager

When you see a mother with her baby and the baby is first learning to sit up, she is telling her baby, “Come on, you can do it. That’s my girl. You can do it. Pull yourself up. Oops. Come on now. Try again.”

When you see a father with his baby who is trying to take its first steps, he says to him, “Come on, now. Come to daddy. Take a step, now. That’s it. Come to me. You can do it.”

It’s the same for a baby’s first bites of solid food, or when the child is learning to ride a bike, or learning to tie shoes. What about the first day of school? There’s mom saying, “It’s going to be fun. There will be other kids there. The teacher will read you stories. You’ll get to go on the playground for recess.” And when it is time to be dropped off and the child’s anxious tears appear, mom gives a comforting hug, and says, “It’ll be okay. I will be back to pick you up after school.”

Baseball game. Dad is the loudest voice in the stands shouting, “Just keep your eye on the ball. Wait for a good pitch.” He has spent hours in the back yard pitching to him, giving him all the same advice and encouragement. That’s part of a parent’s job: to encourage. Any parent knows that encouraging a child, or an adolescent, does not always mean being a cheerleader. Sometimes it requires finding the proper motivation to get the child to do something he or she would rather not do. A threat to take away a beloved privilege unless the Science grade comes up by the end of the marking period. The looming possibility of grounding, or taking away a cell phone, or possibly just extra chores. These are all ways to encourage someone. Maybe they aren’t pleasant ways to encourage, but they can be effective.

But like on the first day of school, sometimes encouragement takes a more tender form. A reassuring word, a hand on the shoulder or a pat on the back, even a note left in a lunch box. When the kids at school are less than kind, or she fails to meet her own expectations, what is required is a word of comfort along with the gentle encouragement that a parent constantly provides.

When the child grows up, and the difficulties of life become more vexing, the encouragement doesn't stop. It may take on a different form. Starting your own first business, is kind of like taking your first steps. "Come on, son. You can do it." But dealing with the miscarriage of your first child is a different matter, and it requires a different kind of comfort and encouragement.

I am told that you never stop being their father or mother. The relationship changes as life changes, but you never stop worrying, and hopefully you never stop encouraging. I know from my own experience that you never stop needing encouragement.

One of the New Testament words for the Holy Spirit is *Parakletos*. In the reading today from John's Gospel it is translated as Advocate. The word has a legal sense, as in one who pleads your case. It's broader sense is one who is called to one's side, or to one's aid. It is often translated as Comforter. I recently heard a new translation for this word that really caught my imagination. Dr. David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, who was the featured speaker at our spring Bishop's Conference for Clergy, Lay Professionals, and Spouses, said that his preferred translation of the word is *Encourager*. I like that. The Holy Spirit as the Holy Encourager.

How often do we need encouragement? Probably more often than we get it. Our own earthly parents cannot always be with us. They can't always be there cheering us on. I know, as a father, my goal is that my children will always hear my voice in their ear, always hear me telling them, "Come on, you can do it. That's it. Keep it up. Keep going. You will be alright." That's probably why we spend all those hours in the back yard with them. We know that we will not always be there. We hope that somehow between pitches and fielding grounders they learn whatever it is that they need to get through life.

Jesus was in the process of saying goodbye to his disciples. He had much more to say to them, but they could not bear it all at once. So he promised to send the *Parakletos*, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Encourager, who would continue revealing to them the eternal Truth that Jesus embodied. It would be his voice in their ear as they faced the challenges before them.

You and I have never met Jesus face to face. But we have heard that little voice that urges us to go on when we feel like giving up. We have heard that voice that chastises, and motivates us to do what we know we should, but really do not want to do. We have heard that voice that assures us that all will be well, even when our heart is breaking and we are losing hope. When Jesus left the earth, he did not leave us comfortless. He sent his Holy Spirit to be with us until the end of the ages. That Spirit, that presence, remains with us, always. It gives us the strength to face the challenges we face, and the grace even to overcome.

Pentecost is a joyous time for us to remember the encouragement of God in our lives. It is also a time for us to remember that the same Spirit that encourages each of us also directs the whole Church. It sends us forth to be encouragers and comforters. God has poured out his Spirit upon all flesh. The Holy Spirit never rests. It constantly moves and constantly moves us. If we

think of the encouragement we receive as belonging just to us, our own kind of personal comforter, we have missed the point. Just as I hope my children will grow up to be good, encouraging parents, the Spirit constantly calls us into situations where we can be witnesses for Christ, encouraging the world in his name. So as we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit today, let us remember how we have been encouraged, and how the Spirit might be using us to encourage others.

AMEN